

Letters



Threat Or Saint?

I have just returned from fieldwork in Rajasthan and am working at the national archives in Bihar. Your article on Roop Kanwar was the one article on the subject which made sense to me. It resonated with my own knowledge and experience of the region. I really appreciated it and it has also enabled me to put in perspective what I went through in terms of sexual harassment in the small towns and cities of Rajasthan.

For the past year and a half, I have been working on a social history of Mira. I have worked with the peasantry and artisans in Rajasthan as well as with middle class, upper caste women, hearing how Mira is being sung about in the oral tradition. My work has less to do with Mira's own songs, and more with the way she has been retained amongst different classes in Rajasthan and Saurashtra around the Deorala region.

The tradition retains its vitality and richness though one can trace the overlaying of this by the dominant trends of Hinduism. With the commercialisation of this sphere by Anup Jalota and the like, it becomes more essential that the alternative noncommercial tradition be grasped and recorded before it becomes completely overlain.

You say in your article that Mira is being sung about by Rajputs in Rajasthan. Part of my work is to show how the Rajputs, particularly in Mewar, still see Mira as a threat, and the contra-dictory pulls involved in the process of granting her sainthood.

Parita, Gujarat

What Is Tradition?

I regularly get books here. Friends from different places send me books since they

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know that I am alone here in incarceration. This is a blessing in disguise. I get time to write but, as you can understand, ideas generally emerge in communication. One cannot read books and newspapers and write without any communication with people.

I find your article "The Burning of Roop Kanwar" in Manushi No. 42-43 very serious and thought provoking. In this context, I want to share my ideas with you. You are right when you say that reformers wrongly characterised the Deorala episode as the product of illiteracy, whereas it was the product of a modernised, prosperous combine. This applies to many customs, beliefs and even superstitions that are attributed to the religious practices of village folk or illiterate people. To give two examples, the immersion of Ganesh idol taken out in a procession was not part of the religious practice of Telugu people. Dasara (Vijaya Dashami) is still celebrated as Arjuna's victory over the Kauravas in south India. But now we find Ravana's effigy being burnt on that day in every town of Telengana. Both are products of RSS, Vishwa Hindu Parishad and other such organisations.

So, even in religion, it is the vested interests that act as authorities. It is hard to make out what was native in custom

and tradition and what was imposed. Today's religion, not only Hinduism but others too, is nothing but a part of a monopoly industry. The erosion is so fast and violent that it is difficult to find here the primitive nature of the culture as, say, in Africa.

Varavara Rao, undertrial political prisoner, Secunderabad

Life And Death Matter

This is in response to the article "Exposing The Rot : Sexual Harassment of Students" in Manushi No. 45. It is a fact that the present system obliges PhD research scholars to depend on the supervisor's recommendation for further studies or academic positions. For a PhD research scholar, it is as if life and death are in the hands of the supervisor.

It is high time for the University Grants Commission to evaluate the present structure and plug the loopholes. Educated women should join together and raise their voices against these atrocities.

We should insist on a police enquiry into the suicides of several research students in the Indian Agricultural Research Institute and the botany department, Delhi University. Preventive measures should be taken immediately to prevent such tragedies.

T, Kamali, Mother Teresa University, Kodaikanal

Vasudha Lamba Case

The murder of my only daughter Vasudha Lamba should be still fresh in your memory (see Manushi No. 28, 1985). She died by a gunshot in the house of her in-laws, 62, Khan Market, on the night of January 30, 1985, barely a month after her marriage. Money, power and social contacts have again proved effective.

Even the so called independent investigating agency, the CBI special investigation cell, has been forced to commit its report to the safety of the culprits.

It is now over a year since the CBI, on March 11, 1987, submitted its report to the chief metropolitan magistrate, Mr Chugh, recommending its closure, despite the facts admitted in the report that there are no fingerprints on the revolver alleged to have been used by the deceased and no fingerprints on the pen said to have been used by Vasudha to write the supposed suicide note. The CBI agrees in the report that the case has been mishandled at the initial investigating stage, but hesitates to say that the whole case has been spoiled by the police who have converted a murder case into one of suicide to save the Lamba family.

The case is repeatedly being postponed by the magistrate, perhaps to avoid any discussion. Now the date of hearing has been fixed for May 9, 1988. This is the tenth date fixed so far....

R.P. Dheer, Delhi

Harassed Mother

You have been championing the cause of women in a number of ways. More often than not, it is the daughter-in-law who is harassed. But I know of a case of a 65 year old widow, with two mentally handicapped daughters, who is being constantly harassed by her daughter-in-law with the son as a mute witness who sometimes connives with his wife in the game of cruelty.

The house belongs to the widow, yet she gets no help from neighbours or relatives to drive her son out. Everyone expresses lip sympathy but no one offers concrete help. The main aim of the son and daughter-in-law is to capture the property. The widow has a small income of her own from interest and is not dependent on the son.

There is also an older son, married and settled separately, who, though interested in the property, does not want to be involved in family disputes. This torture has been going on for some years and now

a point has been reached where there is fear of some untoward incident of violence taking place....

Anil Agrawal, Bombay

Why Not ?

Two policewomen, Urraila and Leela, of Madhya Pradesh have created a stir by their recent marriage. The unusual couple have been suspended from service, and are awaiting the authorities' decision on their appeal against the suspension order. Can two persons of the same sex marry each other ? Such a marriage is void under Indian law. But, today, many people are living together as friends without marriage, especially in the big cities. In Gujarat, such arrangements have acquired a semilegal status through the system of friendship contracts, whereby two people sign a contract, declaring their intention to live together as a couple.

If marriage is not ordained by god, but is based on a mutual agreement by two people to live together, why cannot such an agreement be made by two people of the same sex ? Since the law does not



recognise homosexual marriage, such a marriage cannot be an offence in law. That is why the police authorities suspended the two women not on the ground of their marriage but because of their alleged unauthorised absence from duty.

Is it a mental sickness or perversion to be a lesbian ? Doctors and psychologists do not think so, today. Then why cannot two people of the same sex spend their lives together ? India, progressing

towards the twenty first century, should answer this question.

Asha Chaturvedi, Raipur

(translated from Hindi)

Health Education

Gadchiroli is a rural area with an extremely backward forest based economy and a very low rate of literacy. From March 8 to 20, SEARCH, which has been working here for two years, and four other organisations, organised a health *yatra*, which moved to nine centres, and was participated in by about 25,000 people.

There was a poster exhibit on issues like danger signals in pregnancy, gynaecological diseases; who is responsible for sterility and for determining the foetus' sex; immunisation; ill effects of smoking and drinking. Competitions were organised for the cleanest home, in order to give recognition to the work done by women. Surprisingly, the first prize in the last village was won by a male invalid beggar ! Blood tests were arranged and iron tablets given to the anaemic.

Slide shows were organised on men's and women's bodies and on sexually transmitted diseases. The cultural nights which went on till 2 a. m. included group songs, and a play "When the husband gets pregnant." A memorandum against the recent decision of the Maharashtra government to charge heavy fees from all patients in government hospitals was signed by 150,000 people from 70 villages. The appeal was handed over to two local MLAs at the concluding function. They promised to take up the issue. ...

Abhay and Rani Bang, Gadchiroli

Victim Ostracised

Nearing midnight on April 14, 1988, I heard persistent knocks on the door. It was a teenaged girl, Visalakshi, accompanied by an elderly gentleman, Govindarajan, both pleading for shelter for the girl who had been driven out of her parents' home because of social ostracism following rape.

On August 17, 1987, Visalakshi of village Thepperumanallur, near

Kumbakonam, while returning from her professional studies, was dragged into a sugarcane field and raped by one Rajangam. Visalakshi is the daughter of Subramanyam who runs a wayside eating stall. He has meagre earnings and many dependants. Rajangam, acknowledged by the whole village to be the rapist, is a Congressman. His only occupation is rowdiness. His father is a big landowner and a political bigwig attached to the AIADMK. Rajangam has a long police record but manages to hush up all the cases filed against him.

Visalakshi was sent to a government hospital and returned home only after undergoing treatment for a number of days. A police case was registered and Rajangam was arrested but soon released on bail. He came to the village, got drunk and created a scene in front of Subramanyam's shop. He threatened him, saying : "Anybody giving evidence against me will be made a sacrificial goat before Annadorai's statue."

Visalakshi's friends, out of fear, stopped seeing her. No one from the village or her community, the Brahmans, came to her aid. Only one villager, Govindarajan, came to her rescue, by approaching many authorities on her behalf. But no action was taken against Rajangam. The villagers asked Govindarajan also to leave the village. Even local social welfare organisations took a lukewarm attitude to the case. At present, Visalakshi is being supported by Govindarajan and staying with Durga Women's Organisation. She is doing some tailoring work.

B.V. Rajatthi, Tamil Nadu

Our Ideals

I received Manushi No. 44. I find a lot of improvement in it. It is gratifying that there is one magazine that gives expressive tongue to the problems of Indian women, compared to other women's magazines which lay stress only on the "look" and "cook" aspects of a woman's life—aspects which only the elite among Indian women can afford to be immersed in.

Women's magazines in India should not depict the age-old picture of a woman as submissive, meek, suffering and

sacrificing. The motto of our magazines should be Awake ! Arise ! Be seated on your rightful place. Even Sita, the ideal of Indian women, did not compromise. She did not go back to Ram who threw insults at her and banished her. Draupadi did not forgive her brother-in law for attacking her modesty. We have to follow our great ideals. ...

Popati Hiranandani, Bombay

Government Sustenance?

I wonder why you do not accept advertisements issued by agencies and departments of the government. Generally, these are mere announcements which concern everyone and do not display women's bodies. I appreciate your concern against consumerism by not allowing advertisements of trashy or overpriced consumer goods. In any case, government advertisements should be enough to sustain your journal. The same question arises in case of government grants, if these are unfettered, of course.

Further, there is nothing inherently good or bad in the naked form of either sex. The female body is as natural as the male. There is no harm in presenting either

if they do not provoke anti woman feelings. There should be no bias in Manushi unconsciously supporting the dying attitude of keeping women confined, veiled and restricted to being a mother, sister or daughter.

G.S. Varma, Patna

The experience of newspapers, including big ones, is that government advertisements and other subsidies are used as an arm-twisting device to influence editorial policy.

In any case, we have always seen collecting subscriptions and persuading people to give donations as an important political task because in the process we simultaneously link many of them to Manushi's future and to the wider human rights movement of which it is apart.

This seems the best way not only of ensuring readers' sense of active participation in Manushi's development, but also of ensuring its autonomy and its commitment to the movement rather than to any set of donors or institutions. Such readers' involvement is an everyday confirmation that Manushi exists in response to a felt need.

—Manushi